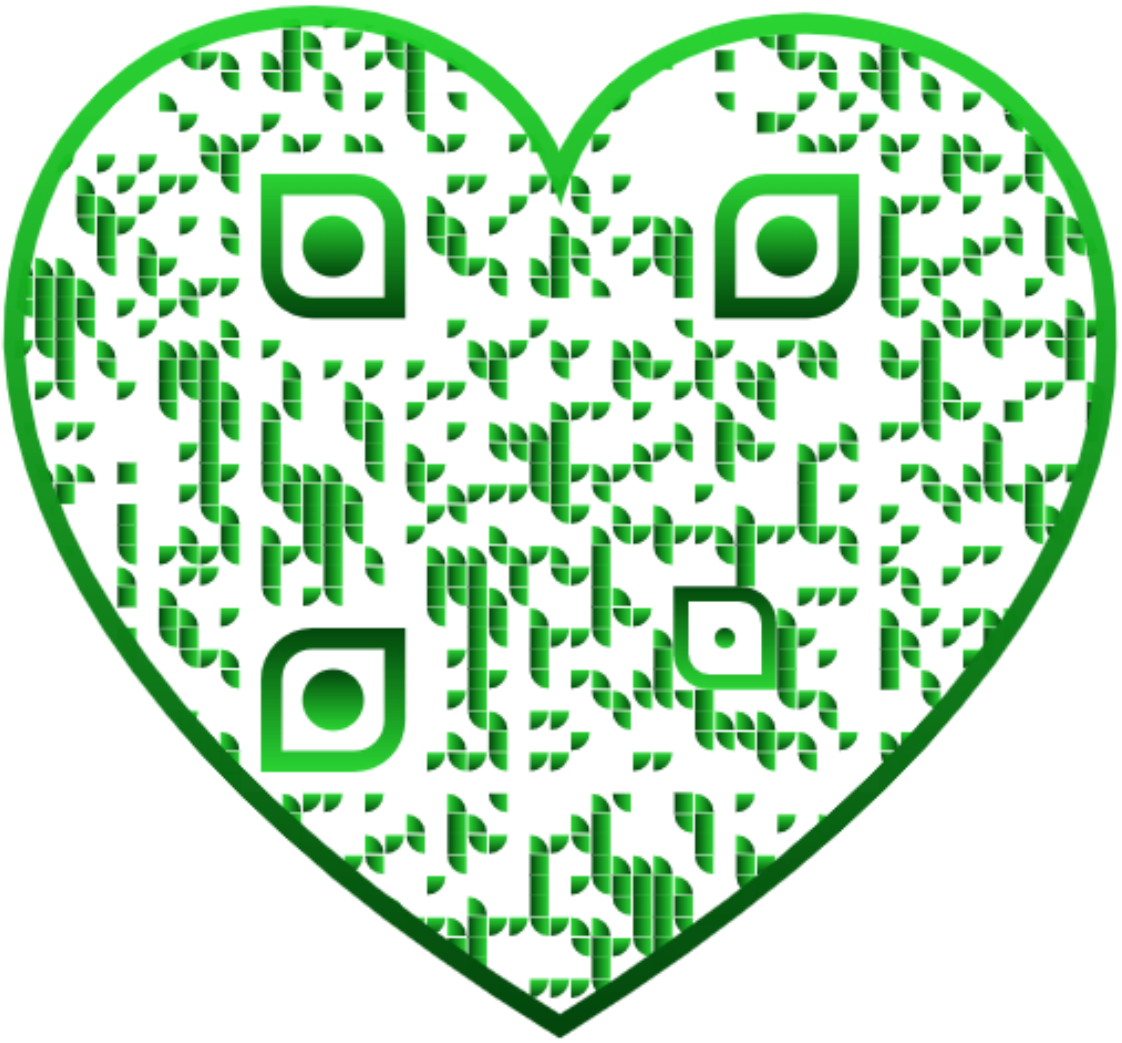
MARK GREENWOOD

HISTORY HUNTER



THE VANISHING

MARK GREENWOOD
HISTORY HUNTER

FREMANTLE PRESS

INTRODUCTION

In 1978, a young pilot took off from Melbourne on a twilight flight to King Island in the Bass Strait, between mainland Australia and Tasmania. He never returned. Less than an hour after take-off, his conversation with an air traffic controller would spark one of Australia's most perplexing mysteries.

I'm a history hunter, drawn to search for the truth. Join me as I delve into the unexplained and investigate the extraordinary story of Frederick Valentich.

ARE WE ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE?

Are we alone in the universe? This question has intrigued humankind for centuries. We look to the stars and wonder if life exists in faraway galaxies. For many years, the only 'evidence' of extraterrestrial life came from fake or fuzzy photos of Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs), bizarre crop circles, reports by alarmed eyewitnesses and some who claimed to have been abducted by aliens.

Scientists believe that the universe may be infinite, with the potential for life in many places. So far, sensitive receivers haven't picked up any definitive communication signals from the stars. Probes to Mars have found evidence of water and ice, but no Martians. Yet strange flying shapes and darting fleets of lights, hovering or orbiting in formation, have been reported worldwide.

Astronauts, pilots, police, and people from all walks of life, including a former president of the United States, Jimmy Carter, claim to have seen UFOs. Today, government agencies around the globe are devoted to collecting information on what they now refer to as Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (UAPs). The recent name change (from Unidentified Aerial Phenomena) broadens the definition to account for unidentified phenomena that appear in the air, in water, or transitioning between different mediums. Military intelligence aims to assess any technological advances, as well as potential threats these might pose to flight safety or national security.

For many years, UAP sightings remained unproven until 2020 when the US Department of Defense declassified videos of aerial phenomena demonstrating advanced aerospace technology, characterised as 'unidentified'.

'Look at that thing, dude,' gasps the pilot of an F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter jet off the coast of San Diego, while an oval-shaped object, described as 'a giant Tic Tac', accelerates at speeds never seen before.

A series of incidents caught on film also includes an encounter with an object that first appears below the ocean's surface, churning the water. Elongated in shape, it rises suddenly and hovers above the water. With no visible means of propulsion, it accelerates at extreme speeds and performs

advanced manoeuvres. Pilots question what they are watching. ‘Wow, what is that?’ one exclaims. ‘Look at it fly!’

A US Navy video, referred to as ‘The Gimbal’, shows a UAP in the skies over the East Coast of the United States. It travels at hypersonic speeds, rotates and spins like a top before defying gravity, hovering stationary against the wind.

When modern military aircraft are outclassed by the superior performance capabilities of a UAP, it’s either an advanced craft or it’s not from Earth.

Unidentified Amorphous Phenomena are out there. The question is, are they interplanetary visitors to Earth from alien worlds? Sceptics argue that most sightings fall into explanatory categories, like manufactured airborne clutter — things like drones, high-altitude weather balloons, fireworks, satellites, and space junk re-entering the atmosphere. Other sightings are caused by natural atmospheric phenomena, rare weather and cloud formations, meteorites, or the unusual optical alignment of stars and planets.

The Gimbal.
Still from a declassified video of an encounter between a Navy F/A-18 Super Hornet and a UAP.

When reporting a close encounter, there are three categories. The first encounter is a sighting of a UFO. The second encounter is physical evidence proving the existence of an alien. A close encounter of the third kind is contact with alien life forms — the type of encounter that includes alien abduction.

In July 1947, one of the most famous UFO incidents occurred on a ranch in the desert near Roswell, New Mexico (USA). The authorities initially claimed they had recovered a 'flying disk'. The news made headlines around the world. After the US Army examined the wreckage, the story changed and it was declared to be the remains of a weather balloon.

The official government report denied coming into possession of advanced extraterrestrial technologies or recovering any alien flight crew. The debris collected at the Roswell crash site was said to have come from a top-secret research project code-named MOGUL. The now-declassified program

involved high-altitude spy balloons.

But true believers were convinced that something from beyond this planet crashed on the ranch at Roswell. Perception of a cover-up lingered. Years later, witnesses, including former military personnel and respectable members of the community, claimed the object that crashed there contained alien life forms that were taken to a top-secret facility.

Over the years, no physical evidence or incontestable photograph of the 'flying disk' or an alien has been produced. Yet after the Roswell incident, conspiracy theories flourished. Magazine articles and science fiction books about visitors from outer space entertained worldwide audiences and inspired Hollywood storytellers. Movies like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and *ET the Extra-Terrestrial* popularised storylines that placed ordinary people in out-of-this-world situations.

But sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. In 1978, Frederick Valentich, an ordinary young man from Melbourne, found himself in a most extraordinary situation …

A NICE DAY FOR FLYING

Fred Valentich was twelve when his father took him on his first airplane flight. From that day, at Moorabbin Airport, Fred knew he would be a pilot. He just knew it.

After that, whenever an aircraft flew overhead, Fred stopped what he was doing and stared at the sky. He was always looking up. At school, Fred's teachers said his head was 'in the clouds'. The world above fascinated him. At night it was space, the stars and the mysteries of the universe that filled his mind.

His mother, Alberta, worried about a career in aviation. 'It's too dangerous,' she said.

'It costs a lot of money,' said his father, Guido, 'but flying makes him happy.'

The Valentich family had migrated from Italy to Melbourne, where Fred lived with his parents, his brother Richard and twin sisters, Olivia and Laura. Although they were a close family, no one took too much notice of Fred's interest in aircraft. They assumed it was a passing phase, but Fred was determined to be a pilot. *I can do it*, he thought. *I'll surprise everyone*.

Along with his love of flying, Fred had a fascination for space. He kept a scrapbook with clippings from newspapers and magazines detailing UFO sightings. He read books on the subject and was a true believer after he claimed to have seen one with his mother.

'Fred,' she had called out, beckoning him to the window. 'Come and look at this.' At first, Fred and his mother thought the bright light in the sky was an aircraft, but it seemed to hover stationary for too long. 'I hope that thing doesn't come back,' his mother said after it suddenly accelerated out of sight.

At seventeen, Fred joined the Air Training Corps as a cadet and took the first step toward his dream. He took flying lessons in an old Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) training plane. Each flight built up his experience and precious flying hours. But being accepted into the RAAF wasn't easy. Fred's application to train as a military pilot was rejected after he failed the exams.

Undeterred, he turned his focus to becoming a commercial pilot.

Young Frederick Valentich with a Cessna.

By the time Fred was nineteen, he held a private pilot licence and attended instructional classes part-time. He had only one subject to pass to gain his commercial pilot's licence.

Fred Valentich was a young man with everything to live for. He had proposed to his sweetheart, Rhonda Rushton, with a friendship ring. The two planned to keep their intention to marry a secret until Rhonda turned seventeen.

Although Fred took his time to get to know people, he had many friends. He was a reliable hard worker at an army disposal store and always did his share of home duties. Fred lived a healthy life and his instructors considered him to be a capable twenty-year-old pilot. After one hundred and fifty hours of flying time, Fred never took shortcuts when it came to safety.

On Saturday, 21 October 1978, Fred woke up early. He dressed for work and arrived at the kitchen table in good spirits. 'Might pick up some crayfish from King Island later today,' he told his father. Over toast and tea, they discussed

Fred's plan for a return flight across Bass Strait to King Island and joked about how to talk the fishermen out of their catch. Fred had flown the over-water route before, during daylight hours, and encountered no difficulties. Now he had a Class 4 instrument rating, Fred was permitted to fly in 'visual meteorological conditions', which meant he could even fly at night, as long as visibility was clear enough to see the horizon. Fred looked out the window. The sky was cloudless. 'It's a nice day for flying,' he said.

INTO THE UNKNOWN

Fred was right. On 21 October 1978, the weather was perfect for flying — a beautiful spring day with excellent visibility, clear skies, light wind gusts from the north and no appreciable turbulence. He spent the day at work before heading to Moorabbin Airport. Fred submitted his flight plan at 5:20 pm, advising the briefing officer of his intention to fly across the Bass Strait to King Island and return to Moorabbin Airport. He gathered up three bright yellow life jackets, 'in case someone wants a ride back,' he explained.

With an estimated departure time of 5:45 pm, Fred anticipated a forty-minute flight to Cape Otway, on the southern tip of Victoria's western coast, followed by the journey to King Island, which would take twenty-six minutes. He expected to arrive with enough sunlight that there would be no need for runway lights at King Island Airport.

Fred strapped himself into a rented single-engine Cessna 182L, registration VH-DSJ. Its call sign was 'Delta Sierra Juliet', the final three registration letters. Fred closed the door and started the engine. He studied the panel gauges and ensured the press-to-talk microphone was operational. After checking the oil pressure and going through the pre-flight check, Fred noticed the fuel was low. The previous pilot had not topped up the tanks.

Fred taxied the plane over to the refuelling ramp. While waiting for the fuel truck, he checked the propellor, wings, rudder, hinges, struts and tyres. It was 6:10 pm before the aircraft was refuelled to capacity, giving it three hundred minutes of flight time and a range of eight hundred kilometres. Fred checked his watch and waited for his turn to take off. It was now well past the planned departure time. He looked down the runway, then up at the sky, before finally lifting off at 6:19 pm.

After climbing to cruise altitude, the plane levelled off and headed southwest, hugging the Victorian coastline. Fred's route from Moorabbin Airport to King Island took him across Port Phillip Bay, on to Cape Otway, then out over the Bass Strait.

The radio crackled to life.

'Delta Sierra Juliet.'

Fred adjusted the volume.

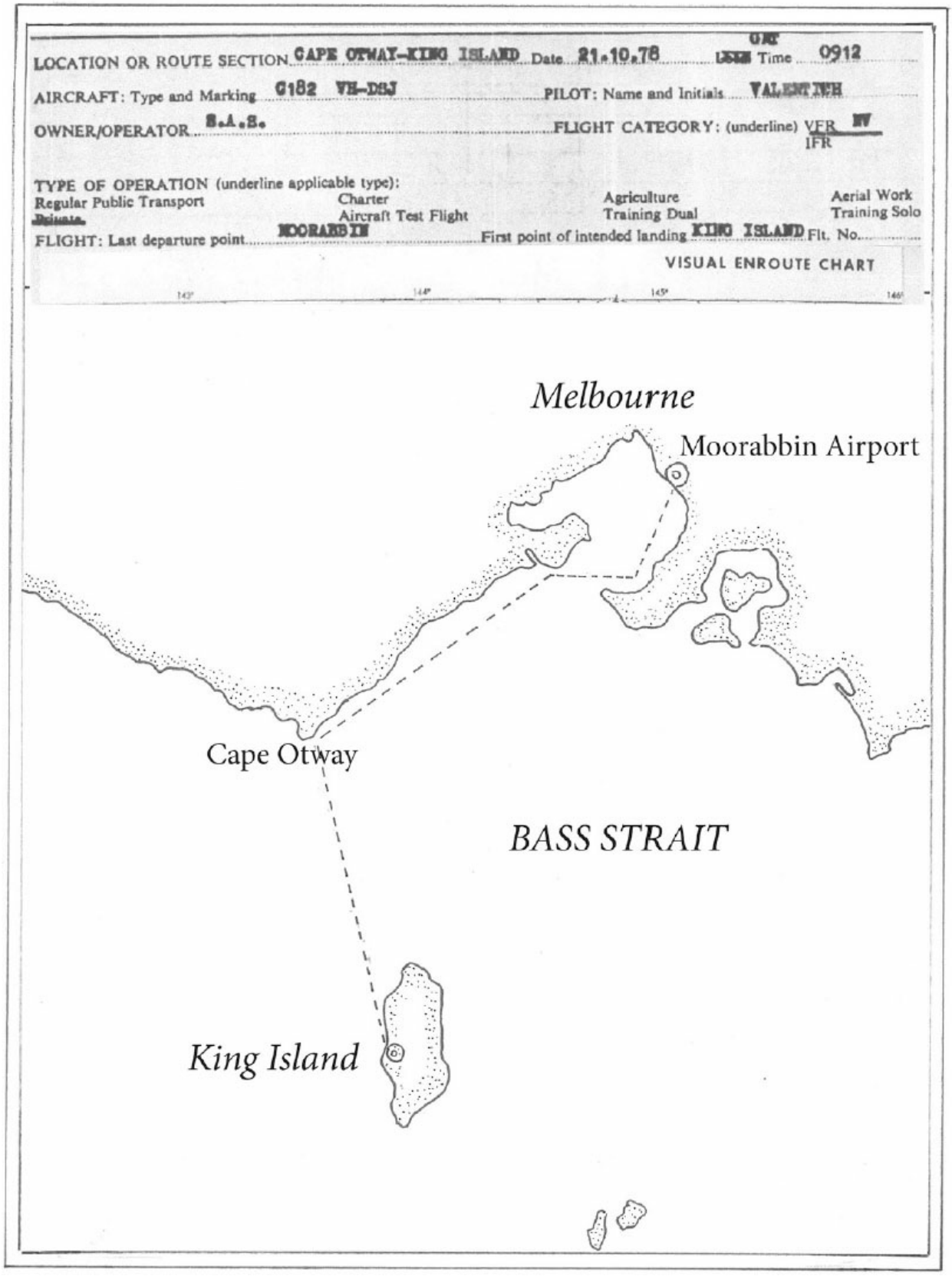
'*This is Melbourne flight service. We copy your take-off from Moorabbin. Have a good flight.*'

Steve Robey operated the radio at the Flight Service Unit. He was well qualified to provide advice, being a commercial pilot himself. His job was to update pilots with flight-related information, such as weather changes, and alert them to other air traffic in the area.

'Delta Sierra Juliet — I'll expect a call when you reach Cape Otway.'

Fred picked up the microphone. 'Delta Sierra Juliet, Melbourne, roger.'

In the twilight between dusk and darkness, faint stars began to appear. It was 7:00 pm when Fred reached the lighthouse, a visual reference point. 'Melbourne, this is Delta Sierra Juliet. Passing Cape Otway now.' He reported perfect flying conditions and pointed the Cessna toward King Island.


LOCATION OR ROUTE SECTION CAPE OTWAY–KING ISLAND Date 21.10.76 GMT Time 0912
AIRCRAFT: Type and Marking C182 VH-DSJ PILOT: Name and Initials VALENTICH
OWNER/OPERATOR S.A.S. FLIGHT CATEGORY: (underline) VFR IFR
TYPE OF OPERATION (underline applicable type):
Regular Public Transport Charter Agriculture Aerial Work
Private. Aircraft Test Flight Training Dual Training Solo
FLIGHT: Last departure point MOORABBIN First point of intended landing KING ISLAND Flt. No.
VISUAL ENROUTE CHART
143° 144° 145° 146°
Melbourne
Moorabbin Airport
Cape Otway
BASS STRAIT
King Island

Frederick Valentich's intended flight route.

Ahead, the western horizon was a bright orange glow. With take-off delayed, Fred was now well behind schedule. The sun was sinking. It would be almost dark when he arrived at King Island. With limited night flying experience, a twilight landing without runway lights was perilous. Six minutes later, Fred called in. 'Melbourne; this is Delta Sierra Juliet. Is there any known air traffic below five thousand feet?'

The conversation that followed would spark the most baffling mystery in Australian aviation history.

CLOSE ENCOUNTER

Fred was six minutes out from Cape Otway, cruising at an altitude of five thousand feet, when he noticed an unusually bright light. He reached for the microphone.

The following is the voice transmission between Frederick Valentich (DSJ) and Steve Robey, Melbourne Air Traffic Control Flight Service (FS), commencing at 7:06 pm (1906:14) and ending at twenty-eight seconds after 7:12 pm (1912:28) on 21 October 1978.

1906:14 **(DSJ) Melbourne, this is Delta Sierra Juliet. Is there any known traffic below five thousand?**

Steve Robey, the flight controller at Melbourne Airport, checked the radar.

1906:23 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet, no known traffic.*

There must be a mistake, Fred thought. Keeping the plane straight and level, he reactivated the microphone.

1906:26 **(DSJ) Delta Sierra Juliet. I am … seems to be a large aircraft below five thousand.**

1906:46 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet, what type of aircraft is it?*

The radio hissed with static. Fred adjusted the headset and rubbed his eyes.

1906:50 **(DSJ) Delta Sierra Juliet. I cannot affirm. It is four bright, it seems to me like landing lights.**

1907:04 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet.*

If it's a military jet, Fred thought, *surely they'll see it on the radar.* He pressed the button to speak.

1907:32 **(DSJ) Melbourne, this is Delta Sierra Juliet. The aircraft has just passed over me, at least a thousand feet above.**

At first, the object was below him. Now it was above. Fred had never seen anything move that fast. No aircraft he knew of could perform such extreme speeds and manoeuvres.

1907:43 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet, roger. And it is a large aircraft, confirmed?*

1907:47 **(DSJ) Er — unknown, due to the speed it's travelling. Is there any air force aircraft in the vicinity?**

Above the roar of the engine, Steve Robey's voice crackled in the headset.

1907:57 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet, no known aircraft in the vicinity.*

Maintain altitude, Fred told himself. He searched the darkness for the lights of King Island.

1908:18 **(DSJ) Melbourne, it's approaching now from due east towards me.**

1908:28 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet?*

1908:49 **(DSJ) Delta Sierra Juliet. It seems to me that he's playing some sort of game, he's flying over me two, three times at speeds I could not identify.**

Steve Robey's main concern was that Fred needed to maintain his bearings and altitude, despite the distraction. The young pilot sounded in control, but was clearly rattled by what he saw.

1909:02 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet, roger. What is your actual level?*

Fred wiped the sweat from his brow.

1909:06 **(DSJ) My level is four and a half thousand, four five zero zero.**

1909:11 (FS) Delta Sierra Juliet, and you confirm you cannot identify the aircraft?

1909:14 **(DSJ) Affirmative.**

1909:18 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet, roger. Stand by.*

Fred fumbled for the microphone.

1909:28 **(DSJ) Melbourne, Delta Sierra Juliet. It's not an aircraft, it is …**

1909:46 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet, can you describe the — er — aircraft?*

1909:52 **(DSJ) Delta Sierra Juliet. As it's flying past, it's a long shape … cannot identify more than it has such speed … it's before me right now, Melbourne.**

The young pilot sounded genuine to Steve Robey. There was no reason to suspect any deception.

1910:07 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet, roger. And how large would the — er — object be?*

Now the bright light appeared above Fred.

1910:20 **(DSJ) Delta Sierra Juliet. Melbourne, it seems like it's stationary. What I'm doing right now is orbiting and the thing is just orbiting on top of me also. It's got a green light and sort of metallic like, it's all shiny on the outside.**

1910:43 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet?*

1910:48 **(DSJ) Delta Sierra Juliet. It's just vanished.**

1910:57 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet?*

1911:03 **(DSJ) Melbourne, would you know what kind of aircraft I've got? Is it a military aircraft?**

1911:08 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet, confirm the — er — aircraft just vanished.*

1911:08 **(DSJ) Say again.**

1911:17 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet, is the aircraft still with you?*

Stay calm, Fred repeated to himself. He rechecked his speed and altitude.

1911:23 **(DSJ) Delta Sierra Juliet. It's now approaching from the southwest.**

1911:37 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet?*

1911:52 **(DSJ) Delta Sierra Juliet. The engine is rough idling. I've got it set at twenty-three twenty-four and the thing is coughing.**

1912:04 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet, roger. What are your intentions?*

Fred's voice was difficult to hear through the crackle and pop of interference.

1912:09 **(DSJ) My intentions are — ah — to go to King Island — ah — Melbourne. That strange aircraft is hovering on top of me again. It is hovering and it's not an aircraft.**

1912:22 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet?*

1912:28 **(DSJ) [Open microphone records seventeen seconds of metallic sounds.]**

1912:45 *(FS) Delta Sierra Juliet?*

Air Traffic Control received no further transmission from Delta Sierra Juliet. Fred's last words were followed by strange, pulsing metallic sounds. Steve Robey tried but failed to recontact VH-DSJ. The open microphone transmission terminated with static, then silence. An alert was issued that was upgraded to 'Distress Phase' when Fred's plane failed to arrive at King Island. An air, land and sea search was immediately initiated.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Early Sunday morning, Guido Valentich paced the kitchen, listening to the news on breakfast radio. Fred hadn't come home the night before. It was out of character. Fred's mother sensed that something wasn't right. 'Don't worry,' Guido tried to reassure his wife. 'He probably stayed over on King Island.'

At 6:00 am, breaking news confirmed their worst fears: a search was underway for a single-engine aircraft with a sole occupant missing between Cape Otway and King Island. Guido's hands were trembling when he telephoned Moorabbin Airport. Officials verified that his son was the missing pilot.

Guido consoled Alberta. Together the family prayed for good news from the search and rescue mission. Around 10:30 am, the telephone started ringing — and it never stopped. 'There's talk that a UFO was involved in Fred's disappearance,' Guido told Alberta.

That evening, prime-time television news alleged that a radio transmission between Fred and the flight controller indicated that an Unidentified Flying Object was implicated in the pilot's disappearance. The report aroused public interest and the pilot's conversation came under intense scrutiny. On talkback radio, callers from all over Melbourne reported seeing unidentified lights in the sky on the night Fred vanished.

Two days later, front-page news stories published exerpts of the transcript of communications between Fred and the Melbourne Flight Service Unit. Fred's eyewitness description of a UFO encounter made headlines around the world. The Valentich family and Fred's broken-hearted girlfriend were interviewed by police and air accident investigators, and misquoted by reporters. The story became the centre of a worldwide media frenzy. Sensational headlines declared that aliens had abducted Fred.

Guido Valentich fronted the media. 'I'm confident my son will be found safe,' he said. 'He made three previous flights to King Island. We live in hope.'

THE AUSTRALIAN

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Phone Melbourne 139 9333 Perth 328 1000 Sydney 2 0924

'It's a long shape... coming for me right now... hovering on top of me'

UFO MYSTERY

Plane vanishes after 'loud metallic noise'

By ROBIN SOUTHEY

FREDERICK VALENTICH ... missing over Bass Strait

A MASSIVE sea and air search was continuing last night for a light aircraft which vanished over Bass Strait seconds after the pilot reported he was being followed by an unidentified flying object.

The pilot, Mr Frederick Valentich, 20, of Avendale Heights, a Melbourne suburb, was on a flight from Melbourne to King Island on Saturday night when radio contact was lost at 7.12 pm.

The plane, a $43,000 single-engined Cessna 182, is owned by Southern Air Services, of Moorabbin. Only the pilot was on board.

In his last minutes of radio contact near Cape Otway Mr Valentich told Melbourne control he was being followed by a large aircraft with four bright lights travelling at high speed.

The Department of Transport last night released the following tape-recording of the ground-air conversation between Melbourne Flight Service and the missing aircraft.

This is the transcript:

7.06 pm: Pilot asked Melbourne FIight Service Unit whether there was any known traffic in the area below 5000ft.

Flight Service Unit: No known traffic.

Aircraft: Seems to be a large aircraft below 5000ft.

FSU: What type of aircraft?

Aircraft: I cant confirm. It has four bright lights. Appear to be landing lights. Aircraft has just passed over me about 1000ft above.

FSU: Is large aircraft confirmed?

Aircraft: Affirmative. At the speed it's travelling, are there any RAAF aircraft in the vicinity?

FSU: Negative.

'IT'S NOT AN AIRCRAFT'

7.08 pm. Aircraft: Melbourne, it's approaching from due east toward me. It seems to be playing some sort of game. Flying at speed I cannot estimate.

FSU: What is your altitude?

Aircraft: 4500ft.

FSU: Can you confirm you can't identify aircraft?

Aircraft: Affirmative.

7.09 pm. Aircraft: It's not an aircraft. It's . . . (break in transmission).

FSU: Can you describe aircraft?

Aircraft: It is flying past. It is a long shape. Cannot identify more than that. Coming for me right now. It seems to be stationary. I'm orbiting and the thing is orbiting on top of me also. It has a green light and sort of metallic light on the outside.

Aircraft then said the object vanished.

FSU: Confirm it has vanished.

Aircraft: Affirmative. Do you know what sort of aircraft I've got? Is it military?

FSU: No. No military traffic in the area.

7.12 pm. Aircraft: Engine is rough-idling and is coughing.

FSU: What are your intentions?

Aircraft: Proceeding to King Island. Unknown aircraft now hovering on top of me.

FSU acknowledged that message.

There was then a long metallic noise on the radio and contact with the aircraft was lost.

Light aircraft began a visual and radio search when the plane failed to turn up at King Island on arrival time of 7.28 pm.

An RAAF Orion from Edinburgh, South Australia — a long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft — spent all day yesterday searching the area off Cape Otway where the plane disappeared. The pilot later reported having seen an oil slick in the area.

The slick however, lying about 18 miles north of King Island is believed to be too widespread to have come from a light aircraft. Tests will be made today to determine whether it is oil or fuel.

But the rescue co-ordination centre conducting the search from Melbourne remains mystified by the disappearance.

Conditions on Saturday night and all day yesterday were ideal, with fine weather, a mild north-westerly breeze and almost unlimited visibility.

The missing aircraft was carrying a lifejacket and a "black box" radio survival beacon transmitting on a high distress frequency.

The Australian Coastal Surveillance Organisation in Canberra has alerted all shipping and three crayfish boats equipped with radio are working their way up the west coast of King Island and toward Cape Otway on the Cessna's flight path.

A thorough land search of Cape Otway and King Island has failed to find any trace of the aircraft.

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EDITORIAL — PAGE 6

Always wanted to fly: father

By CAROLYN ARMSTRONG

FREDERICK Valentich's only ambition was to be a pilot, his father, Mr Guido Valentich, said last night.

"Once I took him down to Moorabbin and we went up in an aeroplane and ever since then he wanted to be a pilot," Mr Valentich said.

"I didn't take much notice until he was 17 and he joined the Air Training Corps."

A calm Mr Valentich explained last night that his son had left at 6.15 p.m. on Saturday to fly to King Island to pick up some lobsters for the officers of the Air Training Corps.

"He intended to get back at 10 o'clock the same night," he said. "We were expecting him home because another family was having a social reunion and he was coming too."

Frederick Valentich had never flown to King Island at night before although he had made three or four trips there in daylight.

The young pilot had an instrument rating and he had flown with an unrestricted licence since February.

He spent three years in the Air Training Corps before becoming an instructor.

He did most of his pilot training with Southern Air Services and had to pass only meteorology and aerodrome legislation before gaining his commercial licence.

"He was very keen, quite good and not over confident," Mr Valentich said.

Mr and Mrs Valentich have three other children, Richard 12, and twin girls, Olivia and Lara, 4.

INSIDE TODAY

PHIL WILKINS analyses OUR CHANCES IN THE ASHES — PAGE 7

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LATE NEWS

200,000 see Pope take office

UNITED PRESS
ROME, SUNDAY

POPE John Paul II assumed full papal powers today as the first non-Italian Catholic spiritual leader for 455 years in a simple outdoor investiture.

The former Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Poland, elected the 264th pontiff by the cardinals on Monday, emerged from St Peter's Basilica to wild applause and cheers from a crowd estimated at 200,000.

The white wool Pallium scarf symbolising the Pope's formal assumption of power was placed on his shoulders by senior Cardinal Deacon Pericle Felici.

Then the 125 cardinals, clad in ivory silk brocade vestments, knelt at the Pope's feet one by one and kissed the gold papal ring on John Paul II's right hand.

Delegations from 100 nations attended the ceremony, including King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia of Spain, Prince Rainier and Princess Grace of Monaco and a U.S. delegation led by the Speaker of the House of Representatives Mr Tip O'Neill, and President Carter's National Security adviser, Mr Brzezinski.

The 58-year-old Pope, one of the youngest in modern times, paused for special words with some cardinals, especially the primate of Poland, Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski.

Stampede by States for foreign cash

WESTERN Australia will lead a rush by the States to borrow overseas funds following hints that the Federal Government will give the goahead at the next Loan Council meeting.

The Prime Minister, Mr Fraser, said on Friday that the meeting, early next month, could be "historic."

He was speaking in Perth after meeting the West Australian Premier, Sir Charles Court.

The West Australian Government's overseas loans shopping list amounts to $650 million for three major projects.

They are: Between $60 and $80 million on infrastructure for the Alwest-Worsley alumina project, 185 km south of Perth; $150-$180 million for the integration of power supplies in the Pilbara and between $360 and $450 million for the Dampier-to-Perth natural gas pipeline.

Sir Charles said the Worsley project had highest priority.

The NSW Premier, Mr Wran, said yesterday his State would be seeking loans of at least $100 million.

He said $90 million was needed to help pay for the construction of a new export coal loader at Port Kembla and at least $100 million was required for the development of a new power station.

"There has been a continuous stream of international bankers coming to my department in the past few weeks so I do not think we will have any trouble raising the money," he said.

In Brisbane the Queensland Premier, Mr Bjelke-Petersen, welcomed Mr Fraser's move, "providing it is fair dinkum."

"But we also hope that Canberra does not intend to keep its huge tax harvest and tell the States that if they want some money they must go overseas to find it," he said.

The South Australian Premier, Mr Dunstan, said he was delighted Mr Fraser had committed himself publicly on the matter.

He said: "The South Australian proposition on the Redcliff project must undoubtedly rank very high on projects which would qualify, as it fits more closely to the guidelines than any other project submitted to the Loan Council."

The Redcliff project is a proposed $568 million complex to be located near Port Pirie to process the "wet" components of natural gas from the Cooper Basin.

The Deputy Premier of Victoria, Mr Thompson, confirmed yesterday that the State had applied to raise overseas loans for the Loy Yang power project near Traralgon, in Gippsland, and for Melbourne's proposed world trade centre.

In Tokyo today a $191 million loan agreement from Japanese banks to the Australian Government will be signed at the Australian Embassy.

This is one of the largest long-term syndicated loans yet given by the Japanese private sector to a foreign government. The term is 20 years.

The Australian Government will use the funds for road construction and repair.

Fears for missing docker

THE disappearance of an official of the Painter and Dockers Union has sparked fears of a new wave of violence on Melbourne's waterfront.

Mr Leslie Kane has been missing for three days and last night police feared he had been murdered.

Chief Inspector Paul Delasio, head of the Homicide Squad, said Mr Kane "might have been murdered about 8 pm on Thursday. — possibly in the northern suburbs — and his body carted away."

Detectives fear that Mr Kane, 39, may have been killed in connection with next month's union elections.

His wife reported him missing on Friday morning and told police he had been abducted from his Broadmeadows home in his own car.

HEADS-and-tails order on Goodyear Corner in the Castrol Six-Hour classic at Amaroo Park, Sydney, yesterday with Mike O'Brien (NSW) leading Bob Rosenthal (Vic), Peter Dunstan (SA) and Alan Hales (NSW). None finished in a place. Jim Budd and Roger Heyes, of Sydney, took the event for the second time. — BRIAN BOLTON photo

RACE REPORT — BACK PAGE

PAGE ONE SPORT

I played well, says Connors

AMERICAN Jimmy Connors tipped his first beer for a week and declared he had played good tennis in beating Geoff Masters in the final of the $175,000 Custom Credit Australia Indoor Championships at Sydney's Hordern Pavilion yesterday.

Connors overwhelmed Masters 6-0 6-4 6-4 in under 90 minutes in the best of five sets.

In the doubles final, John Newcombe and Tony Roche won comfortably, 6-4, 6-3, over John Marks and Mark Edmondson to give Newcombe his fourth indoors title.

FULL STORY — BACK PAGE

Easy win for U.S. golfer

AMERICAN Lanny Wadkins verified his position as one of the world's best golfers with a three-shot win in the $50,000 Victorian Garden State PGA Championship at Melbourne's Woodlands Golf Club yesterday.

His third sub-par round yesterday allowed him to comfortably beat overnight leader Bob Shearer, with West Australian Terry Gale third.

Wadkins, who was troubled throughout the weekend with hay-fever, said he thoroughly enjoyed the championship and would "love to come back to Australia."

FULL STORY — BACK PAGE

Britain fears secret Zimbabwe arms deal

By PETER TERRY

THE British Foreign Office is investigating the possibility that a secret arms deal has enabled the Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) Air Force to keep its ageing British-built jet fighters at battle readiness.

Officials are worried that the jets are being kept operational with spare parts from Britain.

The investigation began soon after six Zimbabwe jets launched an attack on a black nationalist guerilla base deep inside Zambia last week.

No official figures have been released on the number of casualties in the attack but they are believed to have been high.

The planes used, Hawker Hunters, are at least 25 years old and would need considerable maintenance to keep them in the air.

Defence experts are convinced the planes could only be kept at battle readiness if someone was supplying Zimbabwe with spare parts.

The Hunter was one of the best fighter aircraft Britain developed and in the early 1960s was in operation with the air forces of at least eight countries.

Today, as far as it is known, only India and Zimbabwe still use the jets as operational fighters.

Spares for the aircraft are kept in Britain for the benefit of the Indian Government.

The plane's manufacturer, Hawker Siddeley, has merged with the British Aircraft Corporation, which is now part of the giant government-owned British Aerospace industries.

British Aerospace has many private agents around the world and it is possible they have access to Hunter spares.

But Foreign Office officials want to pinpoint the precise source.

The latest investigation comes in the wake of disclosures that British Petroleum and Shell evaded sanctions for years by supplying Zimbabwe with oil by way of third-party outlets.

The disclosures sparked a major political row in Britain and forced the Government to send the Foreign Secretary, Dr Owen, to Africa to explain the position to Third World nations.

GUERILLAS REUTID — PAGE 5

Poisoned three without doctor

SUVA: Three people critically ill on a remote Fijian island after eating poisonous fish, are being treated only with traditional medicine because there is no doctor within hundreds of kilometres.

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Front page of The Australian *newspaper, 23 October 1978.*

Guido Valentich holding a photograph of Fred.

Privately, air accident investigators believed the Cessna had crashed and sunk intact. While they agreed that Fred's disappearance was unusual, their focus was not on UFOs. The objective of their investigation was the prevention of future accidents.

The flight controller, friends and family, work colleagues and flight instructors were all interviewed. When Fred's girlfriend, Rhonda Rushton, gave evidence she raised the subject of UFOs. 'We were driving in the ranges just a week before he disappeared,' she said, 'and he spoke about extraterrestrial contact. Fred said if a UFO landed before us, he would get in it — but not without me.'

Guido confirmed his son's interest in UFOs had started as a schoolboy. 'He read books and watched films on the topic. It was a hobby,' he said, 'but Fred's belief was strengthened after seeing a UFO. My wife saw it too. They

described it as larger than a star, hovering then moving at astonishing speed. Fred believed in "flying saucers" and worried about an alien attack.'

It didn't take long for conspiracy theories to surface, starting with rumours that the voice transmission tape had been cut in the interest of national security to avoid public panic. People gossiped that something 'fishy' was going on. 'Where's the wreckage?' they asked. 'Why was the pilot's voice so ''matter of fact" while describing an encounter with something so outer-worldly?'

Journalists began questioning Fred's motives and reasons for making the flight. Did the Cessna crash into the sea, or did Fred plan his disappearance? Was it all a hoax? Before departure, he told the briefing officer at Moorabbin Airport that he might bring back passengers, but no one was waiting at King Island for a ride to Melbourne. Fred said he was picking up crayfish, but no seafood orders had been placed. None of the fishermen recognised the name Valentich and it was unlikely that crayfish would have been available in the early evening without a pre-order.

Fred's girlfriend retraced the flight plan in a chartered plane. In the company of Fred's air training mates, Rhonda Rushton spent days combing the rocky headland and searching thick forest near Cape Otway. 'I know he's alive,' she said. 'He told me if he ever got into trouble over the sea, he would return to land. He may have crashed and be badly injured.'

After no trace of Fred or the plane was found, Rhonda returned to Melbourne. Being naturally shy, she hid from the media.

COLD CASE

The Rescue Coordination Centre at Melbourne Airport launched immediate action when Fred's communications with the flight controller abruptly ended. After he failed to arrive at King Island, search and rescue efforts focused on locating the missing pilot and any signs of debris from the Cessna. Assuming the aircraft had ditched into the water, authorities knew that time was crucial. A potentially injured pilot, clinging to wreckage in the waters of Bass Strait, would not survive long when the ocean temperature was close to freezing.

At 7:35 pm, the runway lights were switched on at King Island Airport. A search aircraft was dispatched from the island. On a clear, starry night, visibility was excellent, but no wreckage was sighted. A second plane took off half an hour later, tracking Fred's flight plan to the island. The lights of fishing boats could be seen in the dark water. Despite many components of the Cessna being designed to float, no life jackets or any buoyant pieces of the aircraft were spotted.

Over the following days, a flight path reconstruction identified a triangular 'splash down' area, where it was believed the plane was most likely to be. An intensive land and sea search was underway. Police and volunteers combed the rugged coast of King Island. Surveillance authorities alerted ships to keep a lookout for wreckage.

The day after Fred vanished, an RAAF Orion aircraft with sophisticated radar and sonar equipment joined the search and rescue mission. Lookouts identified an oil slick eighteen miles north of King Island, but it appeared too large to have been caused by a light plane. A radio beacon was dropped to transmit the location. Samples recovered by boat were analysed at a Defence Department research laboratory. Results indicated that the substance was marine diesel and not from an aircraft.

The RAAF Orion and other aircraft continued to scour the ocean, but no trace of Frederick Valentich or the Cessna was found. After five days, the official search was called off and air safety investigators took over. Private pilots continued to hunt for wreckage. Beaches were combed in the expectation that the wind and waves might wash crucial evidence ashore.

Searches yielded no new clues.

The potential ‘splash down’ area was vast, prompting questions that the investigation was focused on the wrong location. If Fred had become disorientated or feared for his safety, it was suggested that he may have turned back to the mainland rather than proceeding to King Island.

A month after his disappearance, a pilot flying at four thousand feet altitude reported seeing what appeared to be the outline of a submerged plane forty-eight miles from King Island, in an area close to where Fred vanished. A second attempt to pinpoint the location was unsuccessful after the seas became rough and a gale warning was issued.

Pilot tells of UFO then vanishes
What the pilot said
PLANE IS MISSING AFTER U.F.O. REPORT
‘It’s coming for me right now’
UFO TOOK OUR BOY — PILOT’S PARENTS
Bass Strait mystery
UFO MYSTERY
Missing pilot reported UFO ‘playing with Cessna’

For many years, it seemed that Fred’s aircraft had vanished without a trace. Then, five years after his disappearance, an engine cowl flap belonging to a Cessna 182L washed up on a beach near Flinders Island Airport. A cowl

flap controls airflow over the engine. Although the find was three hundred and fifty kilometres from King Island and far from the official search area, it offered hope that this small piece of wreckage might prove that Fred's plane had ditched in the Bass Strait.

Investigations revealed that a corroded aluminium operating bolt on the cowl flap could have failed on impact or in flight. The serial numbers partially matched Fred's plane. Although it was too heavy to float, navy scientists speculated that storms and sub-surface currents could have 'walked' the engine cowl across the ocean floor over five years. But according to the Flinders Island Airport manager, two other Cessnas with similar serial numbers had lost the same part during take-off before 1983. Given these two incidents, and the fact that the engine cowl had washed up near the airport, the part was considered unlikely to have come from Fred's plane.

Department of Transport investigations concluded it *might* have been possible to match the engine cowl flap with Valentich's plane. Today, new technologies could accurately predict the age and provenance of the part, but further tests are now impossible, as the cowl flap was lost. No records exist as to what became of this crucial piece of potential evidence.

In 1982, newspapers reported that a film producer working on a documentary about the Valentich disappearance was approached by divers who claimed to have photos of Fred's aircraft on the ocean floor between Cape Otway and King Island. In return for $10,000, they offered to reveal the location and hand over the photos. A salvage operation was proposed, but under intense media scrutiny the divers were suspected of dishonesty and soon became 'scarce'. The images never surfaced, and the ransom money was never paid. The matter was considered a cold-hearted hoax.

Over time, interest in Fred's story slowly waned. Days, weeks and years passed by, and Australia's greatest aviation cold case vanished from the front pages.

Every year, on the anniversary of Fred's disappearance, friends and family gather to hold a vigil in his memory at Cape Otway. A memorial plaque was unveiled by the last man to speak to Fred on that fateful night in 1978. 'We all wish we had the answers to Fred's disappearance,' said Steve Robey. 'Each passing year does not erase the pain of not knowing what happened or what Fred encountered.'

The Department of Transport's aircraft accident investigation determined that the cause of Fred's vanishing was 'unknown'. The mystery was considered 'puzzling' and the case remains unsolved. But there was one question that investigators did not take into account — was a UFO involved in the Valentich vanishing?

IN PLAIN SIGHT

King Island is a rocky, windswept speck in the Bass Strait between mainland Australia and Tasmania. Reports of unexplained phenomena have earnt the notorious stretch of sea its nickname, 'The Bass Strait Triangle'. Like the Bermuda Triangle and other places that seem to draw mysteries to them, 'The Strait' has a reputation for vanishing ships and planes. Yet despite often violent seas and unpredictable winds, it is a busy shipping lane. On a daily basis, commercial and private aircraft fly overhead, to and from the mainland.

In the days leading up to, during and after the night Frederick Valentich vanished, hundreds of UFOs were reported to government investigators, police, news media and the Air Force. It seemed flying objects were in plain sight. Puzzling accounts of unexplained lights and descriptions of strange flying objects came in from all over Victoria, Tasmania, the Bass Strait and King Island. Whether people were believers, sceptics, or somewhere in between, the number of sightings by multiple witnesses suggested something unusual was happening in the skies.

Three days before Fred's encounter, a disc-shaped light was observed over the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. In North Melbourne, red and green sheets of light were reported with white lights moving in a circling motion. Soundless, wingless flying objects, described as an oblong zeppelin shape, vivid silver in colour, were witnessed.

On the day Frederick Valentich vanished, a woman in Tasmania reported a shiny silver object heading out into the Bass Strait. At a similar time, a metallic, oval-shaped object that defied explanation was seen hovering over a western suburb of Melbourne. A silver UFO was observed moving slowly over the sea at King Island. For six weeks before 21 October, numerous King Island residents had reported unexplained bright lights moving in the night sky.

In Melbourne, just over an hour before Fred vanished, twelve awestruck tennis players and several cricket players stopped playing and watched two cigar-shaped objects travelling west to east with no visible means of propulsion. The objects were described as silvery in colour with no sound and

no wings.

At 4:15 pm the same day, a woman and her fourteen-year-old son also observed two silver cigar-shaped objects moving slowly from the southwest. The distinctive objects were estimated to be the size of an aircraft, but they made no sound. Later that afternoon, a woman in southeast Melbourne reported a large metallic object flying at high altitude across Port Phillip Bay.

At the same time Frederick Valentich reported his encounter, a man and his two nieces were travelling along the Great Ocean Road. One of the girls spotted strange lights in the dusk sky. At first, the driver thought they were from an aircraft. 'But what about the green light above it,' she asked. After the car pulled over, all three occupants claimed to have seen a green light 'riding' on top of a small airplane.

After Frederick Valentich's final voice transmission, before the public knew specific details about an alleged UFO connection to his disappearance, reports came in from all over Victoria of illuminated discs or spheres and the luminescent glow of flying objects shaped like cigars.

On the same night as Fred's vanishing, a family on holiday on the southern coast observed an extremely bright light darting about in the sky over the Bass Strait. 'It accelerated at tremendous speed with sudden zigzag manoeuvres,' they said, 'beyond the capabilities of any known aircraft.'

Two other families saw a mysterious light over Port Phillip Bay that 'flashed a brilliant white ray of light.' West of Cape Otway, witnesses were amazed by a diamond-shaped object in the sky with rows of lights shining from underneath. 'It was orange and red in colour,' they said. 'It remained stationary, floating for several minutes before suddenly changing colour and accelerating away to the south.'

Witnesses in southeast Melbourne could not control the picture on their TV after observing an unidentified object emitting beams of red and green light. 'Globes in the kitchen and lounge room lights blew out,' they claimed. 'Horses, dogs, cats — all the animals were spooked.'

Three days after Fred disappeared, the crew on a ship in the Bass Strait

reported a luminous fast-moving light in the sky. Around the same time, from the northwest to the southeast of Melbourne, reports came in of a silver-coloured, cigar-shaped flying object that appeared to be intelligently controlled and moving too fast to be an aircraft.

The sheer number of UFO sightings could not be ignored. Well-defined solid objects, some disc- or crescent-shaped, or illuminated cigar shapes, were detected in the skies. All were difficult to explain. Phenomenal rates of climb and manoeuvrability reported were beyond belief. Clearly something strange was happening. From Geelong, Frankston, Cape Otway, Brighton and along the Great Ocean Road, a wave of sightings described similar erratic lights in the sky.

The most bizarre report came the day after Fred went missing. A farmer observed a large saucer-shaped object hovering over his paddock. 'The most remarkable thing,' he explained, 'was the UFO appeared to have a small airplane stuck to it, wings flat against the side, tail hanging down.' According to the farmer, the aircraft was leaking oil. He scratched the registration numbers into his tractor with a nail so he wouldn't forget — VH-DSJ. The number matched Valentich's Cessna, although at the time of the reputed sighting the registration number had not been made public. 'The object moved off over a ridge in the direction of where some military manoeuvres were taking place,' he said. 'That was the last I saw of it.'

Some reports of 'mystery objects' were said to be planets and stars, but there were many other unexplained sightings, particularly on the day Fred vanished, before anyone knew of his alleged encounter with a UFO.

Sceptics were not convinced. After so many sightings, they argued, why was there not one photograph?

CAUGHT ON CAMERA

The investigation into what happened to Fred focused on finding the aircraft's physical wreckage, but one peculiar piece of information was not considered, as it was not known to exist at the time of the official Air Accident Report.

Roy Manifold was holidaying with his family at their shack overlooking Crayfish Bay, near the Cape Otway lighthouse. Still photography was Roy's hobby. On 21 October, he planned a photographic series to capture the sunset.

At 6:47 pm, less than twenty minutes before Frederick Valentich alerted the Melbourne Airport control tower to his strange encounter, Roy positioned his camera on a tripod at the top of a cliff to use up the last six frames on a roll of film.

Roy concentrated on the camera and manually timed the twenty-second intervals for each photograph. He didn't look up or notice anything abnormal as the sun faded. But one month later, when his photographs were developed, the fourth photo in the series revealed churning water behind a low-lying rock and a dark lump breaking the surface. The fifth photo was normal. The sixth image captured a blurry object surrounded by an unidentifiable cloud-like vapour. The object appeared to be flying above the waves.

'Looks like a UFO,' joked Roy's wife, Brenda. Even though the photos were taken only minutes before Fred's disappearance, Roy was convinced there must be a plausible explanation. Kodak analysed the negatives. They determined the image was not a film fault or developing error. *The Australian* newspaper's chief photographer examined that the image under 300x magnification and agreed with Kodak's assessment. A processing defect in the emulsion was ruled out.

Further computer analysis was conducted by physicists, aerospace engineers and photographic consultants at an aerial phenomena research organisation in the United States. They found no evidence of a hoax. Close examination, including colour contouring, filtering and edge enhancement of the original negative revealed an object with a solid structure. It was not a

cloud or an atmospheric illusion caused by the weather.

The Roy Manifold photograph.

Roy's young son, Jason, was nine years old when his father took the photographs. 'After Dad went inside, I stayed outside to play,' he recalled. He remembered hearing a light plane pass overhead and watching it fly over the sea. 'Suddenly, the sound of the engine stopped. I looked up, but the sky was empty.'

Based on the time that Fred flew over Cape Otway, the sound Jason heard could have been Fred's Cessna, VH-DSJ, heading out over the Bass Strait, just after his father's camera captured something peculiar on film.

LOST IN SPACE

With no crash site or physical wreckage, the Valentich vanishing invites diverse theories about what happened. Flying over water into the setting sun, did Fred experience disorientation that caused him to crash into the sea?

Some aviation experts speculate that the young pilot, attempting a night flight alone, became confused. Instead of focusing on critical tasks, he may have been distracted by the wonder of a star-filled sky. On that October night, what appeared to be four landing lights above him may have been Venus forming a diamond shape with Mars, Mercury and the bright star Antares.

Steve Robey, the air traffic controller who spoke to Fred that fateful evening, doesn't believe the pilot was confused or mistaken by stars or the reflections of his own lights off the ocean. 'It's an open case,' he conceded. 'All I can say is, he didn't sound disorientated when he spoke to me.'

According to the voice transmission recording, Fred reported that his aircraft was orbiting, or travelling in a circular pattern. Minutes later, he said his engine was running rough. It has been suggested that he may have entered a 'graveyard spiral' or his plane became inverted. Flying upside down, the green light he observed could have been his own light reflected off the water.

Experts say this theory is improbable because the Cessna's fuel tanks are in the wings and the gravity-fed fuel system would deprive the engine of fuel if the plane was flying upside down. An assessment also noted that Fred's voice, while under stress, appeared to remain on task. If he was upside down, the lap-sash seatbelt would be so tight and restrictive that he would not have been able to communicate as calmly as he did.

UFO researchers explained that the electromagnetics of a UFO may have affected his compass and caused the Cessna's engine to rough idle and 'cough' as Fred described. The exact cause of Frederick Valentich's vanishing grew more mysterious with each new theory.

If Fred crashed into the ocean, the biggest mystery is why no wreckage was discovered. 'If the pilot suffered disorientation and ditched into the water, surely a thorough search and rescue mission would have found some

debris,' observed Steve Robey.

Is it possible that a crashed plane could sink, leaving no trace, or that rough seas may have dispersed the wreckage? The Bass Strait was unusually calm on 21 October. Rectangular pieces of floating blue and white 'metal' were spotted. At first, it was speculated they might have come from the Cessna, but it turned out to be ships' rubbish. An oil slick found in the search area was marine diesel and not from an aircraft. The engine cowl found years later on a Flinders Island beach was more likely to have come from another Cessna and not a piece of Fred's plane.

Could the lack of aircraft wreckage indicate that Fred did not crash into the ocean?

Because the Cessna was flying too low to appear on the radar, the search area was based on Fred's flight plan. The difficulty of the maritime search was pinpointing Fred's exact location. If he became confused and went off plan, they may have been looking in the wrong area.

Some questioned if Fred fabricated a UFO sighting to stage his disappearance. The night he vanished, it was rumoured that an unidentified aircraft landed near Cape Otway. Fred's plane had enough fuel to fly for almost four hours, with a range of eight hundred kilometres.

If Fred intentionally deceived his family, his girlfriend and the public by turning around and landing on the mainland, why was the Cessna never found? If he crashed in the remote Otway Ranges, perhaps the wreckage of VH-DSJ is still waiting to be discovered in the thick forest.

Official investigators said there was no reason to suspect that Fred would have been anywhere other than where he reported to be, and agreed that he would have had trouble landing or crashing on the mainland without being noticed. Adding to evidence against the possibility of a staged disappearance, was that Fred didn't have a troubled life. He suffered no personal or financial problems. He was in a steady, happy relationship with Rhonda with plans to get married. Fred had many friends and was raised with strong values by his parents. He had earned a solid reputation for hard work. Even when rejected

by the Australian Air Force twice, Fred never gave up. He was an eager young man, committed to a career in aviation.

The last person to speak to Fred was uniquely positioned to judge the pilot's state of mind. 'He sounded genuine when talking to me,' Steve Robey recounted. 'Nothing in what Fred said over the radio indicated a hoax, disorientation or loss of bearings.'

After an extensive investigation, the official government report could not determine what happened to Frederick Valentich and his aircraft. While the investigators were thorough, the report did not delve into the coincidence of numerous sightings of UFOs in the skies over Victoria and Bass Strait before and after Fred's disappearance. Witnessed observations were reported to multiple authorities, including the Department of Transport, police, media and the RAAF, but were not considered or examined.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF AUSTRALIA

Australian Government

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF AUSTRALIA

1 OF 1

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Cover of the secret air crash investigation report, now declassified and held in the National Archives.

For many people, blaming the disappearance of a pilot and his aircraft on a UFO encounter seemed far-fetched. The suggestion was quickly dismissed and ridiculed. But today, a growing body of knowledge about Unidentified Amorphous Phenomena exists. Undeniably, around the time of Fred's disappearance, many members of the public reported fast-moving solid shapes that appeared to be intelligently controlled, and luminous lights that accelerated at extraordinary speeds and then hovered motionless and soundless in mid air. Eyewitnesses were adamant that the superior flight manoeuvrability they saw was beyond the known aircraft capacities of any nation.

Steve Robey doesn't rule out the possibility that Fred did encounter an Unidentified Flying Object. 'There were so many sightings at the time,' he said.

Five days after Fred disappeared, Steve Robey was back at air traffic control and involved in a similar puzzling incident. 'Here we go again,' he said when another Cessna pilot reported an intensely bright light travelling at a phenomenal speed that passed beneath him. A second and third light travelled above him. 'Are there any known aircraft in the vicinity?' the pilot asked.

An RAAF Orion conducting surveillance in the area was cleared to investigate. The pilot observed no lights or unidentified objects, and the incident was not officially recorded. Not long after, a DC-3 pilot over Bass Strait reported a white light following his plane. An unidentified object was picked up on radar, although no aircraft were in the area.

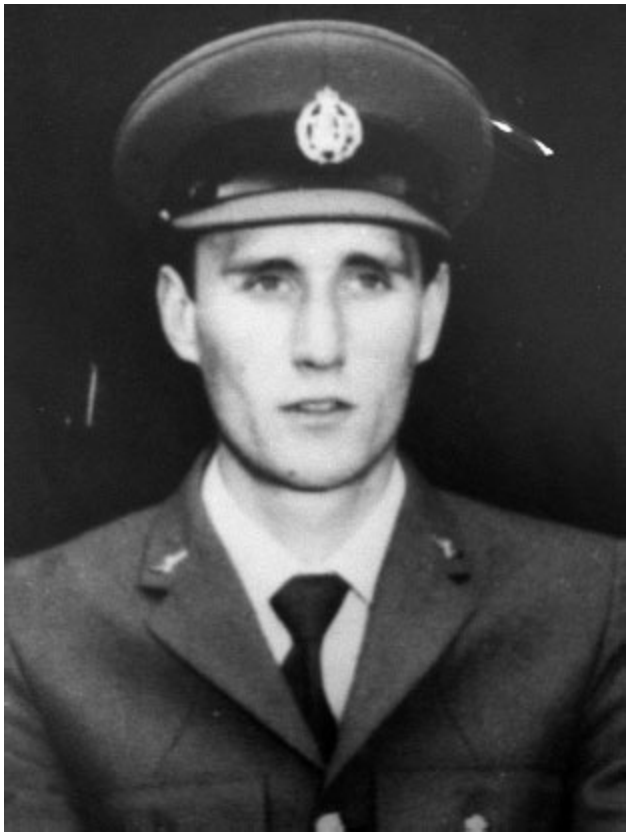
THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE

On 21 October 1978, a young pilot with a passion for flying disappeared during a flight over the Bass Strait. He left behind a heartbroken family and an eerie voice transmission claiming he was being pursued by an Unidentified Flying Object. The recording ended with seventeen seconds of metallic sounds.

'… [it's] hovering on top of me … and it's not an aircraft.'

Those last words spoken by pilot Frederick Valentich are as mysterious today as they were the night he vanished. The Valentich family, and his girlfriend Rhonda Rushton, never believed that Fred had faked his disappearance or the encounter.

Anybody who knew Fred understood how honest he was,' Ms Rushton said. 'He would never make something like that up. If that's what he said he saw — that is what he saw.'



Frederick Valentich.

In this History Hunter case file, the facts raise more questions than

answers. But without physical proof, will we ever know what happened? How could an entire aircraft disappear and leave no trace? Is there evidence waiting to be discovered? Does the answer lie at the bottom of the Bass Strait or hidden in the forest in the remote Otway Ranges?

Perhaps the truth lies hidden somewhere else.

Over the years, many radical theories have been put forward — from involvement in revolutionary electromagnetism and weapons testing at Pine Gap, the secret US base in central Australia, to a super-secret technological program to detect flaws in the nation's airspace defences.

The case of the missing pilot has been studied by investigators worldwide. The official government report failed to reach a conclusion. Paranormal enthusiasts believe Fred was a victim of alien intervention. They point to the fact that for days, weeks and months leading up to Fred's disappearance, there were sightings of UFOs from Victoria to Tasmania and as far away as New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia.

Although multiple reports support the case that unidentified phenomena were in the skies leading up to 21 October, only one photograph connected to the Valentich vanishing has been made public. Roy Manifold's photo, taken minutes before Fred vanished, is regarded by some as proof that UFOs were in the area when Frederick Valentich reported an encounter with an object he described as 'not an aircraft'.

Critics claim Fred Valentich was an inexperienced pilot. His Class 4 rating meant he could only operate 'in visual meteorological conditions'. After a late departure from Moorabbin, he was flying in darkening skies, which could have caused him to become disorientated and unable to tell where he was heading. Did he confuse his own lights or lights on the land? The Royal Australian Air Force had rejected him due to inadequate education. He'd failed exams and had previously received a warning from officials for having strayed into restricted airspace. Some say Fred was an accident waiting to happen.

Frederick Valentich's disappearance has become one of the most

enduring mysteries in Australian aviation history. What makes it unique are the pilot's last words to the air traffic controller, clearly describing an encounter with a UFO. The recorded voice transmission makes this case stand out from other UFO case files.

Why would a person's last words be devoted to describing something that wasn't real? The answer poses the ultimate question — did Frederick Valentich encounter an intelligently controlled Unidentified Flying Object?

Guido Valentich died in 2000. Like the rest of the Valentich family, he never got the answers he hoped for. His son never came home. Despite the coordinated efforts of family and friends, private pilots and search and rescue boats, no trace of Fred or his plane has ever been found.

Did a UFO abduct Frederick Valentich, or did he misidentify what he thought he saw? Is the government hiding the truth? Or did Fred stage the affair and crash into Bass Strait, leaving no trace?

Perhaps there are other explanations beyond our understanding. For now, the strange disappearance of Frederick Valentich remains a cold case. Further examination may one day reveal what really happened. Are you the history hunter who digs a little deeper?

The truth is out there …

THE STORY OF HISTORY

'Mystery creates wonder and wonder is the basis of [our] desire to understand.'

Neil Armstrong
(The first man to walk on the moon)

History hunters collect and analyse evidence in memories, letters, reports, maps and newspaper clippings. Books are sources of inspiration and information — as are declassified government files!

The goal of the research isn't just to gather documents and collect information. These are only the raw materials a writer uses to craft a story. History is not an exact science. There is so much we do not know. Detailed investigation helps writers to draw conclusions and make interpretations.

Researching a cold case such as *The Vanishing* is like excavating an archaeological site, brushing away layers of the story with each piece of information discovered. The goal is to interpret what happened, and how and why it happened. Exploring the subject takes writers on journeys of discovery.

The past is full of wonder and adventure. And there are many baffling mysteries waiting to be investigated.

Mark Greenwood
History Hunter

MORE TO EXPLORE

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THE HISTORY HUNTER

Mark Greenwood is a history hunter. He enjoys delving into baffling history mysteries, searching for lost treasures and investigating unsolved cold cases. His award-winning books include the *History Mysteries* series, *The Legend of Lasseter's Reef, The Happiness Box, The Book of Stone, Boomerang and Bat* and *Jandamarra.*

Mark often teams with his wife, illustrator Frané Lessac, to produce well-known titles such as *Ned Kelly and the Green Sash*, *The Legend of Moondyne Joe, Simpson and His Donkey* and *Midnight: The Story of a Light Horse*. Their latest collaboration is the *Our Country* series — *Where History Happened* and *Ancient Wonders*.

Find out more at markgreenwood.com.au